



NASA's Mars Science Laboratory spacecraft, including the car-sized rover Curiosity, clears the tower and begins an eight-month interplanetary cruise to Mars. (Photo courtesy of NASA/Bill White)

## INL employees attend Mars Science Lab launch in Florida

By [Teri Ehresman](#), INL Communications & Governmental Affairs

There were cheers and tears on the beach a few miles across the water from the launch site of the [Mars Science Laboratory](#) on Saturday, Nov. 26.

Many of Idaho National Laboratory team members who spent the last few years making the launch possible watched in awe as the rocket lifted off right on schedule on the nearly nine month voyage to Mars. The team [fueled, tested and assisted](#) in integrating the [Multi-Mission Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator](#) (MMRTG) that is powering the rover Curiosity's instruments as it heads to Mars. The MMRTG is the latest "space battery" that can reliably power a deep space mission for many years.

Other co-workers and family members watched the launch from a launch party at the Shilo Inn in Idaho Falls and were in constant contact with the group in Florida.

"I thought the launch was awesome. It was great to see the rocket finally take off after all the years of work we put into the program," said Chris Browning who assisted in the assembly, testing and transportation phases of the INL project.

Browning watched in Florida while his wife, Debra, and daughter, Macie, spent the morning in Idaho Falls watching the launch with the group at the Shilo. He said they thought the launch was really exciting and joked they had a better view of the launch over NASA television.

Team member Courtney Swassing, said it was great to be part of the delivery of the MMRTG from Idaho Falls. He said helping with the integration and then seeing the rover powered by the generator you helped with "is a great feeling of accomplishment."



**INL team member SueAnn Keller and her family wait anxiously for the launch of the Mars Science Laboratory.**

Swassing's family lives in Pocatello, so his wife and children were pleased to be able to watch the launch on NASA television. They communicated through text messages as they watched the launch.

[Stephen Johnson](#), director of [INL's Space Nuclear Systems and Technology Division](#), said the launch day was picture perfect. "It all went according to schedule and plan without even a minute delay. In a way it was anticlimatic because it went so smoothly, but it was super to watch."

Johnson was one of the group of people who spent the morning of the launch as part of the NASA emergency response team. He reported for duty before the launch and was trained and prepared in case there was an emergency. His expertise was part of the re-entry and recovery process in the unlikely event of an accident.

Amy Powell, INL quality assurance lead for the mission, was one of several INL employees who worked on the Mars Science Laboratory launch and the previous New Horizons launch in 2006. She said the launch "was a pretty awesome experience." She enjoyed watching the countdown clock as the launch progressed and being so close as she watched the rocket disappear into space.

Team member SueAnn Keller's husband and daughter joined her in Florida for the event. She shed a few tears as she watched the rocket launch with family and co-workers. She said she was proud of the team's accomplishment and was glad to share such a huge milestone in her professional career with her family.

Other team members also commented on the thrill of seeing their years of hard work actually launch



**Many of the INL team members and their families traveled to Florida to watch the Mars Science Laboratory launch live.**

into space. They shared many pats on the backs, hugs and handshakes as the rocket disappeared into the blue Florida skies headed to explore the unknown world of Mars.

Curiosity is expected to land on Mars in August 2012 and carry out its mission over 23 months.

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